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ABSTRACT

The grammar which is concerned with meaning (the province of New Semantics), with its foundations in our perceptions of the surrounding world, can be learned in the elementary classroom through storytelling. Understanding of the sentence concept develops by allowing the child to use his language responsively and deliberately to organize the world he sees. Since this world has a narrative structure, the child can be led to express it, learning in the process sentence structure and, finally, story structure. (Included are a few simple drawings with suggestions for using them and a section of additional notes on teaching procedures.) (JM)

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A GRAMMAR FOR STORYTELLING

James S. Russell
Summit, N. J.

No one, so I am told, wants to hear very much more about grammar. Perhaps that is why I have called the grammar that I persist in wanting to talk with you about -- a grammar for storytelling. I will try to get to the storytelling part very quickly.

I could have called this grammar a self-generating grammar. In a sense, all grammar is self-generating; that is, grammar starts in the spoken words and sentences of people -- of infants, children, adults, all of us. Grammar begins in our perceptions of things and actions that we see, hear, smell, taste, and touch in the real world around us.

The grammar that I speak of is semantically oriented in that it is concerned with meaning, the kind of meaning that in recent years has become the province of the New Semantics. Meaning has its foundations in our perceptions, for, every waking our of our life, we see, hear, smell, taste and touch -- nouns, verbs, and adjectives, even adverbs and participles; and we use these classes of words to organize our world -- to give meaning to it. Stories are one of the ways in which we organize our world and give meaning to it, and it is with perceivable nouns and verbs that we take our first steps in storytelling. What did the ball do? Where did mother go?

Thus, I could have called this grammar perception-based, semantically-oriented, and self-generating. It is all of these.

Having been warned about the reaction to the word grammar in a meeting such as this, I want to get this word behind us quickly and go on to talk about what children see, hear, smell, taste, and touch and

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how they can talk about things, actions, and qualities, but I must add this much more about this grammar that I am [illegible]ating here ever so slightly. It is based, as I have suggested, on the [illegible]nguistics, but its pedigree goes back into traditional grammar. Nouns do, in fact, name things -- living and non-living. Nouns also name what the traditional grammarians say they name -- events, experiences, ideas, and so on. And, as the traditional grammars suggest, verbs name actions, and adjectives name qualities that we perceive, or at least think we perceive in things. But we know that in school textbooks the rules that traditional grammars set forth really lead nowhere. For this reason, traditional grammars quickly become handbooks of social usage.

Is structural grammar in the pedigree of this grammar for storytelling? Well, of course, because we all compose in sentences, and sentences have structures. But structural grammar is, essentially, a decoding process -- suitable chiefly for decoding unknown languages, including those discovered on the barks of tropical trees. Using structural analysis to decode the sentences of our friends, family, classmates, and textbook authors leads mainly to the somewhat unspectacular discovery that they, too, are using the English language.

A grammar for storytelling would never have been derived without the insights of generative grammar, but the transformational aspects of generative grammar seem out of place in an elementary classroom, which may not always be the best place in which to speculate -- at least aloud or in print -- about how sentences can be transformed.

The grammar that I call a "grammar for storytelling" is, in fact, just that: a grammar for telling stories -- a grammar for composing.

Whatever each of us may think about grammar, about how, or if, to teach it, we can agree, I suspect, that the most fascinating thing in the universe is the human mind. Can we not also agree that the chief purpose and joy of education lie in unlocking the minds of young people? Language is, of course, the key to the human mind. I suggest, then, that we listen more to the voice of the child in the class -- a voice that is too often stilled -- and that we let the child use the language that he knows to organize the world that he sees around him.

Life -- the perceptions that swarm around us, like William James' famous fly -- is chaos until we structure it with language. These things, actions, qualities that we perceive around us do not even become reusable units of experience until we at least <u>name</u> them. The black object buzzing around the august head of William James is nothing really "thinkable" until the human mind traps it -- and all things like it -- in the magical web of meaning that we call language, until we give it a <u>name</u>: until it becomes a <u>fly</u>. Once this black buzzing object becomes a fly, it also becomes a noun. Nouns have the power to do or to be -- in fact, to create sentences. So man has imposed the structure of language upon the universe -- to make his world useful and essentially joyful, to give it meaning. You probably know from your own experience that very young children need to know the names of things if they are to work with these things -- play with them, classify them, compose with them.

So, if we would have the success -- rather, the happiness -- of unlocking the minds of the young, we do so with language. Our jobs would seem to be, therefore, to provide occasions in which children use language responsively and deliberately, for a clear-cut purpose.

In a dialogue, as in any casual conversation that he may have with a friend, a child uses language orally to compose within a context of time

and space. He may or may not use what we call a sentence.

I believe that if a child does not learn the concept of a sentence before and as he plunges into the writing system, then the concept of the sentence may elude him forever. Basic "readers" are not the place to learn this concept. For a sentence is more than a group of words that begins with a capital letter and ends with a mark of some kind.

So, we must begin by creating occasions for children to use grammar to compose sentences -- orally, at first.

On the sheets (see attached) that I will now hand out, I have tried to suggest the steps in a process of composing -- a process that begins orally, starting with the perception of a thing.

We could, of course, begin with any thing — a thing that we all can perceive in a classroom perhaps — a thing that can be seen, touched, tasted, heard, or smelled. But working with controlled printed material that can be perceived visually is the most practical method to use in the classroom.

So, let's look at Frame 1.

What do you see?

Well, to begin below the language level -- if one can conceive of such an area of mental activity -- we see an experience (in this instance a representation of one on the paper in front of you). This experience has a tail and a mustache. We have seen this experience before and expect -- perhaps even hope! -- to see it again in one way or another. It is a recurring unit of experience. Because it is a recurring unit of experience, we humans have given it a name -- in English the word lion. It is also a noun. Here is a thing that we can ask the child to name.

This thing happens to have what we call life. It is a living thing. But all things, living or non-living -- all nouns -- have the power to do or to be. All things have what I call Noun Power.

This lion has Noun Pwer. We will see what he can do.

In Frame 2, we perceive -- in addition to a thing -- an action, another recurring unit of experience, to which we give the name run.

Here, also, we can take a giant step and organize our perceptions with language. We can say, "The lion runs." When we do this -- when the child answers the question, "What do you see?" he is using nouns and verbs to compose a sentence.

In Frame 3, we have used another kind of sentence to organize a perceived experience. In this kind of sentence we use adjectives -- not to tell stories but to try to tell the truth about something.

We can classify this lion as a thing, as a noun, in a number of ways -- a living thing, one that can move, one that can be counted. We can compare him with other nouns with respect to his powers and his qualities. We could start eliciting sentences with is -- what I call truthtelling sentences: What is the lion? We can ourselves, or a child.

The lion is a living thing.

The lion is an animal.

The lion is tan, big.

The lion is bigger than a mouse.

The lion is like a leopard.

Then, moving toward personal opinion and away from perceived, testable, or irrefutable truth, we get:

The lion is horrible -- or beautiful.

The lion is the king of the beasts.

This way of organizing our world -- using sentences with be -- embraces the so-called cognitive skills -- classifying, for example -- and also may include, as you can see, metaphor -- (not as far away from primary-grade classifying exercises as one might think). From the viewpoint of composition, this direction also moves us toward expository writing -- stating a truth or an opinion and defending it before others. I would carry this direction only to the edge of exposition in the early grades. I would concentrate, instead, on the direction of storytelling, of narrative, as I try to sugget on page 2.

Here, finally, we come to storytelling.

Our world as we view it has a narrative structure -- inescapably -- as we move from birth to death. With every passing minute, wherever we find ourselves, we recognize the narrative struture of the world -- that it is a world full of stories, real and make-believe. We see our own life as a story; history as a story; even humanity as a story. This narrative way of organizing our world is also the simplest, most natural, and most interesting structure within which children can compose.

In Frame 2 when we ask "What do you see?" or "What does the lion do?" and the child organizes his perceptions, and responds with "The lion runs", we have a sentence. We have a self-generated sentence -- composed responsively and deliberately, generated by the child using a visually perceived real experience.

Whether or not we want to use the terms nouns and verbs with children so that we can talk about these terms, think about them, generalize about them, we have begun to develop in the child a sense of

the sentence. Parts of speech are, of course, names themselves, and we agree that once we have given anything a name it becomes more useful to us; so at some point we want to introduce names, these grammatical terms. They will become known, named parts of the children's self-generated sentences. We can talk about Noun Power -- the power of nouns to take verbs. The child will then be able to think of nouns performing actions, real or imagined, in his own sentences. Thus the world becomes organized, workable, and open to the child as he composes in an elementary classroom.

Please look once more at the storytelling sentence in Frame 2, page 1. Here, we can move beyond organizing perceptions -- into storytelling. We all tell stories -- real or imagined -- in the past tense. Stories are usually about what has happened. The "historical present" is a tense used chiefly by sportscasters telling us what, on TV anyway, we can already see for ourselves. Our reading programs are filled with the present tense, to be sure, but the present tense usually appears in readers, you will notice, in sentences that are part of a conversation -- in dialogue sentences. Check most "readers" and you will discover a perpetual fear and loathing of a verb in the past tense (except said and asked). Then we wonder why children have trouble writing verbs in the past tense! There is also in reading programs a special and unreasonable loathing of the so-called irregular verbs, although orally a child uses an irregular verb in the past tense more than perhaps any other form of verb.

So in our grammar for storytelling we introduce the past tense-- that exotic verb ran: The lion ran. Here grammar and composition meet in storytelling -- in what I call a narrative sentence. The world of reality

and make-believe, of memory and imagination, the world of reporting and literature -- all meet in this single sentence, composed by a child. We have unlocked the mind of a child. He will tell us his own stories.

Now we are off and running. What else can a lion do? What other verbs can this noun take? What stories can we tell about the lion? The lion roared. The lion smiled. The lion ate a fish, sang for his supper, chased a man.

As you can see from the outline, Step II (Page 2), the narrative sentence is essentially geared not only to action but to time and space. Those elements of narration which newspaper people have recognized and made use of -- the 5 W's and How -- can now be introduced: Where, When, and perhaps How and Why did the lion run? Adverbs, prepositions, phrases, clauses, even participles come tumbling out as answers are given to these questions. Amazingly enough, as the child answers the questions Who? What? Where? When? and How? he's producing syntactic structures.

In Step II you can imagine drawings showing a cage and a setting sun. Or the child can imagine them. With such visually perceived drawings you can ask children questions -- Where? and When? These questions elicit words and syntactic structures that fill out the story, giving it context in space and time -- all within the structure of a single sentence. We can permit children to use their own memories and imaginations to compose their narrative sentences. Where would they like the lion to run? When would they like him to run? How would they like him to run? How do lions run? We can tell How with verbs, adverbs, and phrases. (Note Step IV)

The outline also shows (Step V, page 3) how narrative sentences can be expanded -- not by embedding words into other people's sentences but by every child responding to his own perceptions, memories, and imagination -- as he tells a story, real or make-believe.

We see how we can tell more about our lion or about any noun -- by asking the question, "What more can you tell us about the lion -- about the Who or What in the sentence?"

We can move from the sentence-sense of oral composition to written sentences. Once a child knows what a sentence is and what a particular sentence means, he can deal with it as he masters the writing system. It is no longer a group of words beginning with a capital letter and ending -- who knows where?

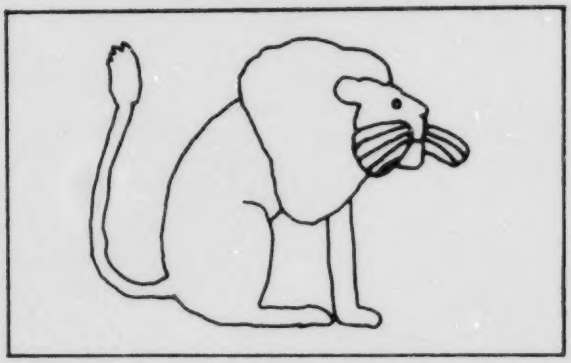
In storytelling we can also go from the narrative sentence to action-sequences -- relating series of actions.

In the simple, self-generated narrative sentence lies the ess of all storytelling, of all narrative literature, as well as the real stories that children can tell about the real world around them and about themselves. From this beginning we can move into the kind of composition that we call reporting -- into news reporting and into observation, journal-keeping, and so on.

The world of make-believe storytelling includes not only narrative fiction, but drama, in which students can participate by pantomime and in acting out with dialogue -- composed in writing or improvised. Then we can ask the child to move from dialogue to monologue -- from drama to narrative. The world of storytelling can also include action in comic strip frames -- so that the children tell stories in several ways,

A Grammar for Storytelling

I. Percept[illegible] ⟶ Naming ⟶ Sentence making



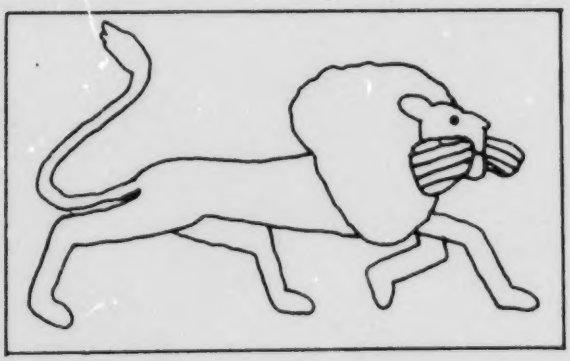
1.

Perception: What do you see?

A thing; a living thing (a noun)

Naming: a lion

Organizing: _____



2.

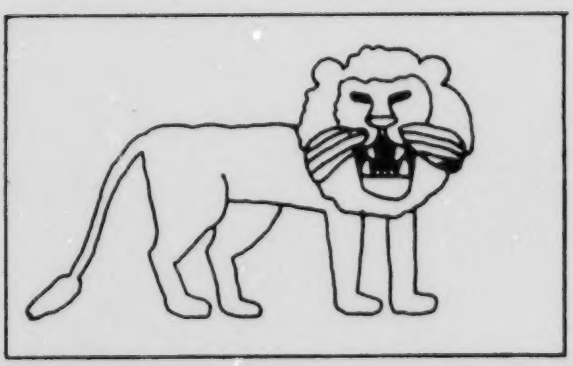
Perception: What do you see?

An action (a verb)

Naming: run, runs, or running

Organizing: The lion runs. (sentence)

Storytelling: The lion ran. (narrative sentence)



3.

Perception: What do you see?

The qualities of the thing (adjectives)

Naming: tan, golden

big (small)

dangerous; horrible; proud; happy; beautiful

Organizing: The lion is tan. (sentence)

Truthtelling: The lion is tan. (perceived)

The lion is horrible. (Perception Plus)

Lions are tan, horrible, etc. (generalization)

II. Storytelling with Narrative Sentences

The 5 W's and How -- Who? What? Where? When? Why? and How?

Who (Subject)	(did) What (Verb)
The lion*	ran.

*Ok -- a lion is not a person! You can ask, "What did what?"

Who	What	Where
The lion	ran	into the cage. (preposition and prepositional phrase)

When	Who	What
At sundown	the lion	ran
Yesterday (time noun)		Where (When)
Then (adverb of time)		into the cage
		here (adverb of place)

When	Who	What
At sundown	the lion	ran
How	Where	Why
happily (adverb of manner)	into the cage	because he was afraid of the dark.

III. Types of predicates

The action that we perceive may, of course, involve another thing:

The lion ate the lobster.

The lion walked with the lamb.

The lion sang for his supper.

The action may be extended by an infinitive:

The lion prepared to eat his supper.

The lion planned to go to bed early.

The action may include a situation:

The lion saw that the keeper had left the cage door open.

The action may include conversation, in one of two forms:

The lion roared, "This lobster is overcooked."

The lion said that the lobster was excellent.

IV. Telling How an action is performed

How the action is performed can be told in several ways.

(a) A more precise verb:

The lion munched the lobster.

(b) An adverb of manner:

The lion absent-mindedly ate the lobster.

(c) A phrase:

The lion swallowed the lobster in one gulp.

(d) A present participle:

The lion, staring sadly into space, finally polished off the lobster.

V. Expanding sentences

Sentences can be expanded by telling more about the things, the Who's in the sentence, in several ways:

(a) with adjectives:

The hungry lion ate the delicious lobster.

(b) with participles:

The scowling lion ate the overcooked lobster.

(c) with phrases:

The lion in the zoo ate a lobster from Maine.

(d) with clauses:

The lion, which had not had a square meal in three days, ate the lobster, which had been flown in from Maine.

Truthtelling Sentences

All sentences do not tell a story, of course. Some ask questions. Some give commands or directions or make requests. Some attempt to tell the truth. Back in Frame 3 we saw a lion that some of us might call dangerous -- an attempt to tell the truth about this lion.

A "Truthtelling sentence" may, of course, be a deliberate attempt to deceive, or simply fail to capture the truth, or express an opinion that may or may not be true or even testable. For example:

A lion is an animal.

A lion is dangerous.

I am a lion.

I am not a lion.

Truthtelling sentences generally use a form of be in the present tense rather than a verb in the past tense, but not always:

Lions roar.

A lion has a tail.

The lion has a stomach ache.

(The last sentence is not a "story," but the lion had a stomach ache is, in fact, a little story, and thus, can be regarded as a narrative sentence. Narrative sentences can tell the truth, but they tell a truth about an action that took place in a context of space and time (Where and When) -- a different kind of truth from the truthtelling sentence. The truthtelling sentence is a more sophisticated way of organizing perceptions and abstractions. It is the basis of expository writing.)

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Additional Notes

(Page 1 not included)

B. If we listen to the voices of children, what do we hear? What do we learn from them?

I am speaking now of children who have not yet entered school

Have not read a word

Have not learned a single rule of grammar

We learn that they can compose and process language.

Linguists tell us that by the time a child enters school,

he has already learned 80% of all that

he will ever learn about language

We have not made much use of this fact. Have we?

In any event, we know that the pre-school child can

1. Issue commands
2. Make requests
3. Ask questions
4. Tell stories
5. Attempt to state truths about the world -- even an opinion is an attempt to state a truth. (a lie)

He does all this orally

In the form of dialogue.

Let's notice

1. That there is a separate purpose to each of these uses of language.
2. There is a separate kind of sentence for each of these purposes.
   a) A command sentence. (Give it to me.)
   b) A request sentence. (Please give it to me.)

c) A question sentence. (Where are your going?)

d) A storytelling sentence. (Our dog ran away.)
-narrative

e) A truthtelling sentence. (This ice cream is too cold.)

The sentence is crucial to our cause as teachers.

4. A sentence is something more than a group of words beginning with a capital letter, ending with . or ? That is why a course in reading is not the way to teach the sentence.

We must go back before the writing system to learn what a sentence really is --

its purpose

its meaning

Troubles

a) The trouble is that in the casual dialogue of children they may use sentences, but they do not know that they are using them. They do not name and classify.

b) Also we want children to learn declarative sentences -- not commands, requests, or questions. In conversation -- dialogue-- these declarative sentences are often elliptical. Speaker, audience, time, space, assumed. (They did too.)

5. So, how do we give a child this sense of the sentence?

1. Create occasions for him to compose sentences --

2. Start with the real world -- with the things, actions, qualities that a child can perceive around him.

3. Let him name things, actions, qualities that he sees, hears, smells, tastes, and touches.

4. Then let him tell stories about what these things can do. Or attempt to state truths about them -- tell what they can be.

6. Let me suggest a way in which we can use grammar to help children to compose their own sentences. Let me try to show how grammar and composition become one at the sentence level.

1. We begin with what a child can perceive.

What can a child --What can any one of us perceive -- see, hear, smell, taste, or touch -- around us?

He can perceive things -- objects.

Let's look around us now. What things can we perceive?

Chairs, tables, lights, magazines -- non-living things.

But living-things, as well — people.

Now these are all familiar experiences -- recurring units of experience. Because they are familiar and recurring we give names to these things.

One of the first things that man does with language is to use it to name. Until we can give names to things, they are not really ours, not really usable. Perhaps you have noticed that children cannot really enjoy things, classify them, or compose with them until they know the name of it.

2. Let me introduce a thing that we can all name and talk about — a thing that is somewhere between a chair and a person — Let me introduce an animal. Let me name this animal. It -- and all things

like it -- have the name lion.

3. Because you are adults, I ask you to imagine that you can perceive in front of us here -- a lion. Here is something that in our imagination helped by memory, we can perceive -- see, hear, smell, and touch.

4. Now what else can we perceive?

   We can perceive actions.

   You can see me move, hear me talk.

5. What else can we, and children, perceive?

   We can perceive qualities --the qualities of things. The color of a chair, the shape of a room -- the size of a magazine.

6. So we and children -- infants for that matter, can perceive things, actions, and qualities.

   We can perceive nouns, verbs, and adjectives.

7. Now let me introduce an idea that I call Noun Power.

   All nouns have the power to do and to be.

   Our lion here has the power to run, roar, kill.

   You and I have the power to perform many actions -- many verbs -- to talk to each other, to dream, hope, change things, as well as many of the verbs that the lion can command.

   Even a chair has some power to do -- to stand, collapse, decay, or brighten a room.

8. So I can ask you, or a child

What is the lion doing?

And you will see — in a picture, or real life, or in your imagination that the lion is running. You will respond and say,

The lion runs — or is running.

You have responded with a sentence. You have <u>generated</u> your own sentence from perceived material. I am sorry to have to report that any child can do this too.

Now suppose I ask what else can the lion do? Whatis its Noun Power?

The lion can eat, sleep, kill.

We get more self-generated sentences. Now tell me a story about a lion — any lion, your lion.

The lion killed a man.

Note the past-tense -- the storytelling tense. So we have generated storytelling sentences based on perception, applying the idea of Noun Power. We can go on to tell all sorts of stories about lions, or anything.

9. We can also use this idea of Noun Power to compose a different kind of sentence — one that attempts to <u>tell a truth</u> about the lion.

The lion is fat.

Lions have the Noun Power to be <u>fat</u>, <u>thin</u>, <u>tan.</u> Even our opinion is an attempt to tell the truth.

The lion is beautiful or horrible -- a matter of opinion.

10. So in this way we can create occasions for children to compose their own sentences expressing their opinion, or truths, or stories -- first orally and then in writing.

11. To elicit sentences that tell stories, we can ask, "Who -- or what -- did what?

A lion ran.

When? Yesterday -- an adverb

As the sun set, the lion -- a clause

Where? Here -- an adverb

Through the jungle -- a preposition and phrase

How? Slowly -- an adverb of manner

Why? Because he was hungry.

These five W's and How are the elements of narrative, and narrative is the simplest, most natural, most interesting way of arranging our perceptions, our world, or the world of a child -- of composing sentences.

Ask who, what, where, when, how, and why, and you will get syntactic structures, to give it the term of liguists. Children will be using grammar to compose.

12. You can imagine what can be done in elementary classes with storytelling.

We can tell stories in drama form -- with pantomime and with and with dialogue, improvised and written. We can then ask students to tell the story as a narrative. We can use comic-strips to help students to sequence action.

13. We can move on beyond the sentence to help students to use language for three general purposes.

    a. To entertain -- storytelling and poetry

    b. To inform -- the world of news -- the real world involving occupations, other nations, sports, other areas of school work.

    c. To persuade -- advertisements, TV commercials, letters to the editor.

7. Tried to show

How grammar can be used to compose, orally and in writing. How the voices and minds of children can replace "textbookese" in the classroom.

8. But physically how can this be done? How about the materials needed in class?

What do we want for students in such a program I foresee

A- 1. Something that would not say "textbook". That he'd like

2. Something fee of instructional exposition/pedagogical pomposity often more difficult than material

3. Something that would encourage performance -- not memorizing rules

4. Something that would include visual material for composing appropriate discoveries in literature, real world, newspaper, advertising, drama -- to develop

5. Not consumable -- We might call this a magazine.

B- Secondly, need a place where student can write, think, organize, order his world in language.

Let's call this a Response Book

Response Book

Let me explain here the teaching process that I foresee.

1. Visual material in the "magazine" activated orally -- for composing orally.
2. Oral responses -- names, nouns, verbs, etc. sentences.
3. Some of these oral responses are "captured" by teacher on the chalk board -- as a guide more toward writing.
4. Oral discussion based on chalk board.
5. But in Response Book student is also correcting his oral responses to writing. The Response Book would be structured for this.
6. Time -- 5 minutes, say -- is given to permit student ot write his notes, his sentences -- pre-writing, writing in Response Book, developing a story.
7. Then compare written notes with others -- learn from peers.
8. Then move into completing a story on his own.
9. So we want a Response Book in the following steps:
   a. Perception
   b. Oral experience
   c. Notation
   d. Ordering - organizing
   e. Composing
   f. Self-editing
10. Synergistic

So we want a Response Book which

Permits individual flexibility of imagination within a structure.

Child not limited by ability to read

by dialectic differences

by fact that he may not come from a language-oriented home

He is working with oral and visual material but he is learning to write

Interchange of oral/writing/ideas-- his own/others -- Synthesize

Teacher's Book - Includes for each leasson a Model Lesson presented as a script for oral delivery, showing how lesson can be developed.

Closing:

But the final joy and achievement of such a program cannot be perceived in its materials -- for those lie in the voices of of the children and in their written responses -- as they compose.

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